

THE SMELL OF THE YAHOO: THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND IN THE NOVEL *GULLIVER'S TRAVELS* BY JONATHAN SWIFT

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ABSTRACT: The novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift is usually considered a comic fable for children. However, it is a severe attack to politics, religion, and science in eighteenth-century England. As literary production is constrained by its own sociocultural context, it allows us to read a novel as a historical document. In this fashion, this work aims to analyze the main satires to the eighteenth-century England deployed by Jonathan Swift in his most know novel as a possible means to depict the *zeitgeist* he was immersed in.

Keywords: Satire, Jonathan Swift, eighteenth-century England

O CHEIRO DOS YAHOO: A INGLATERRA OITOCENTISTA NO ROMANCE AS VIAGENS DE *GULLIVER* DE JONATHAN SWIFT

RESUMO: O romance *As Viagens de Gulliver* (1726) de Jonathan Swift é comumente considerado uma fábula cômica para crianças. Contudo, é um ataque severo à política, religião e à ciência na Inglaterra oitocentista. Como a produção literária é restringida por seu próprio contexto sociocultural de criação. Ela nos permite ler um romance também como uma forma de documentação histórica. Nessa perspectiva, o presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar as principais sátiras à Inglaterra oitocentista feitas por Jonathan Swift em seu romance mais proeminente como um meio possível de se retratar o *zeitgeist* no qual estava inserido.

Palavras-chave: Sátira, Jonathan Swift, Inglaterra oitocentista

Introduction

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift portrays the fortunes and misfortunes of the surgeon and captain of several ships Lemuel Gulliver who has a taste for travelling and goes

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on four separate voyages to remote nations of the world. In such occasions, Lemuel gets acquainted with different humans and creatures, from midgets and giants to highly educated horses. Even though this novel is usually regarded as a tale for the children, according to Carter and McRae (2002), Jonathan Swift dared to criticize and mock authority figures, with ever-increasing venom. Swift (1996) manages to satirize and ridicule politics, religion, society, the monarchy, and even the King of England.

In such scenario, Pasco (2004, p. 01) points out that a great number of cultural historians have suggested that our historical reality would be augmented if it were infused by the information provided by Art and Literature. In that sense, according to Facina (2004) and Kupske and Souza (2015), even the most renowned artist is made of flesh and bone, conditioned to his social class, ethnical origin, gender and historical processes he belongs to or is situated into. Therefore, his free will is constrained by his creative competences that are shaped by the history and the society of his own time (KUPSKE; SOUZA, 2015). Thus, literature can be regarded as a historical product, a document of a certain period in time. In such light, we intend to analyze some of the main criticism made in the novel *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift in this paper as a possible portrayal of the 18th-century England.

1. Restoration to romanticisms and satire

To Carter and McRae (2002), the Restoration did not so much restore as actually replaced. In a political perspective, the 1660s does not open a new age, but it sees the consolidation of a limited monarchy and a parliamentary system that is slightly oriented towards a new democracy. It also feels the intense and gradual rise of the middle class that is soon to guide the new religious, moral and artistic patterns in England (BURGESS, 2008). Therefore, the concentration of the society was on commerce, on respectability, and on institutions, the latter being represented by the Royal Society founded for the improving of Natural Knowledge. However, the Restoration Period also brings to light a cynical and antiheroic period in regular life and in Literature.

With power passage to the new middle class, 18th-century literature would also represent such change by the means of a new literary genre: the Novel. In this sense, even though prototypes of the novel did exist before this period, two novels published in the 18th century might be considered the flagships of the new genre: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

(1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The latter, for example, already brings elements of fantasy, travel, and social observation used to the most modern writer in Science Fiction that became popular in the works of the French writer Jules Verne (CARTER; MCRAE, 2002). According to Silva (2005), both have quite a similar structure and bring a new meaning to the symbol of the island that appears as an icon of the colonialist English expansion that would reach its climax in the 19th century during the Victorian period. These novels represent the *zeitgeist*³ of the period highlighting the middle class and the British society in adventures seeking for new and sometimes unknown worlds. The urban themes appear in Literature, such as politics; themes that the men talk about in their clubs and cafeterias. Burgess (2008) points out that one can no longer expect Shakespearian manifestations or poems talking about shepherds and flowers. The human brain is now in charge, as the literature now does not appear to be moved or to be moving. In such context, the satire was a common literary product.

Satire's function was to mock one's behavior to then correct it, but during the Restoration, it was used mainly to ridicule enemies. It was at first "largely expresses in poetry; the form of poetry perhaps tempered the virulence a little, giving the writing a degree of respectability" (CARTER; MCRAE, 2002, p. 139). In a way, it came to light as a response to the 18th-century return to the precedents of Roman Augustan age, as the new classicism applied the classical culture to create the New Augustan age, the neoclassical, that was in vogue up to about the 1730s or 1740s to Carter and McRae (2002). According to Carter and McRae (2002), restoration satire could be of two types: the kind of very general sweeping criticism of mankind found in poetry in *A Satire against Reason and Mankind* by Rochester, and in prose in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; or it could be highly specific with allusions to real figures in politics and society.

2. The 18th-century England in Lemuel Gulliver's narratives

Swift (1667 – 1745), according to Burgess (2008), is the biggest writing in prose from the 18th century and the writer of *Gulliver's Travels* that narrates the adventures of Lemuel Gulliver due to unlucky accidents in his journeys to recognized ports that end up on remote unknown islands. As a consequence, he had to live with people and animals of different behaviors, sizes, and philosophies. To Santos (2006), the book was first published on 28th

³ The general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of a given era (KUPSKE, SOUZA, 2015).

October 1726 under the title *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World by Lemuel Gulliver, a surgeon and captain of various ships*, and turned to be the biggest best seller in the 18th century.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, as already pointed out, Swift hides a satire in such a smart way that children might read it as a fairy tale. He ridicules humanity, mainly England and its politics. According to Kabak (2015), each of Gulliver's travel illustrates both utopic (e.g. egalitarian society of the Houyhnhnm-land and peaceful Brobdingnagians) and dystopic worldviews (e.g. military government of the Lilliputians), and the reader is invited to question different aspects of human nature and civilization. However, to Santos (2006), the novel can indeed be read as a political document, but it does not necessarily present Swift's personal convictions.

In the first part of the book – *A Voyage to Lilliput* – Gulliver's ship is destroyed and he casts up in an island named Lilliput. As soon as he awakes he finds himself captured by six-inches people.

[...] It seems that upon the first Moment I was discovered sleeping on the Ground after my landing, the Emperor had early Notice of it by an Express; and determined in Council that I should be tied. [...] This resolution perhaps may appear very bold and dangerous, and I am confident would not be imitated by any Prince in Europe [...] supposing these people had endeavored to kill me with their Spears and Arrows while I sleep [...].(SWIFT, 1996, p. 07).

The fragment above shows the initial hostility of the Lilliputians, but, in the end, Gulliver is treated with compassion and concern.

Gulliver sees in Lilliput the mirror of the human race, its worries and values. As a matter of fact, it is possible to relate Lilliput to the political life in England, and the Lilliputians to the English vicious politicians. For example, the English political conditions are mocked when Lemuel gets to know that the king chooses the ministers not on their skills, but on the ability to dance or walk a tightrope. Therefore, the English system of governing is satirized by the description of Lilliput's ludicrous system and government fashions. Thus, we can also perceive a severe attack on the political parties of the time (Whigs and Tories), and on the pointlessness of religious controversies between different denominations within Christianity (CARTER; MCRAE, 2002). These, for example, symbolized between the people of Lilliput and Blefuscu that used to fight due to the fact these two people had differences whether boiled eggs should be eaten by the big or the little end, as we might grasp from the excerpt bellow.

[...] two mighty powers have, as I was going to tell, been engaged in a most obstinate war for six and thirty moons past. It began upon the following Occasion. It is allowed on all Hands, that primitive Way of breaking Eggs before we eat them, was upon the larger End; But his present Majesty's Grandfather, while he was a Boy, going to eat an Egg, and breaking it according to the ancient Practice, happened to cut one of his Fingers, commanding all his Subjects, upon great Penalties, to break the smaller End of their Eggs. The People so highly resented this Law, that our Histories tell us, there have been six rebellions raised on that Account; wherein one Emperor lost his life, and another his Crown. These civil Commotions were constantly fomented by the Monarchs of *Blefuscu*; and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for refuge to that Empire. [...] (SWIFT, 1996, p. 25-26).

The Lilliputian Emperor would represent George I, the King of England during the period of publication. According to Shmoop (2008), George I was a strongly pro-Whig king, and actively persecuted the Tories. The Emperor's vulnerability to being controlled by the ministers in the novel can be understood as George I being likely to be influenced by his favorites. In addition, the Lilliputian Emperor enjoys war, and tries to enslave the Blefuscudians. As Gulliver would not help him to conquest Blefuscu, the Emperor starts to hate him. Therefore, Gulliver decided to escape. The fight between the two tiny people nations described in the book might be a reference to George I's war with France and Austria over Spanish territories (SHMOOP, 2008).

In the second part of the Novel – *A Voyage to Brobdingnag* – in the island of the giants in which Gulliver is quite small, Swift (1996) uses the size differences to express the differences in morality. Back in Lilliput, Lemuel was a common man compared to the amoral tiny Lilliputians. In Brobdingnag, Gulliver still is ordinary, but the giants are moral people. When he first met the Lilliputians, he was tied and threatened by spears; on the other hand, in the giants' land, the first encounter was rather different, as the following excerpt suggests.

All I ventured was to raise mine Eyes towards the Sun, and place my Hands together in a supplicating Posture, and to speak some Words in a humble melancholy Tone, suitable for the Condition I then was in. For, I apprehended every Moment that he would dash me against the Ground, as we usually do any little hateful Animal [...]. I was hurt by the Pressure of his Thumb and Finger. He seemed to apprehend my Meanings; for, lifting up the Lappet of his Coat, he put me gently into it [...]. (SWIFT, 1996, p. 57).

Lemuel then finds himself in the opposite situation he was when in Lilliput. Now, Gulliver who is tiny expects the giants to be monsters, but he discovers they are a peaceful race

of people, who live a peace land. In this situation, Swift (1996) portrays the English fear of who appear to be different or more powerful. The peacefulness of the Grobdingnag people might be captured in other fragments of the book, such as in the following:

[...] My master went out to his Labourers; and [...] gave his wife a strict Charge to take Care of me. I was very must tired and disposed to sleep, which my Mistress perceiving, she put me on her own Bed, and covered me with a clean white Handkerchief, but larger and coarser than the Main Sail of a Man of War. (SWIFT, 1996, p. 61)

Gulliver also sees the human deformations and expresses his disgust towards the dirtiness and shame of the human body. “I must confess no Object ever disgusted me so much as the Sight of her monstrous Breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with, so as to give the curious Reader an Idea of its Bulk, Shape and Colour” (SWIFT, 1996, p. 60).

As opposes to the Lilliputian Emperor, who primarily uses Gulliver as a war weapon against their rivals, the Brobdingnagian King seeks Lemuel to lecture him in English governance so that he finds something that is worth to imitate in his kingdom. Once Gulliver has learned the language of the new remote nation, he gives an account of the English Monarchy, Parliament, religion and judicial system. After the lectures that lasted hours, the king states that he cannot understand how English people avoid corruption or hypocrisy if there are no safeguards against these sins in the government. The king concludes that the English ought to be “the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to Crawl upon the Surface of the Earth” (SWIFT, 1996, p. 67). As the king asks probing questions with regard to England that Lemuel cannot answer, he reaches to the conclusion that England is a lousy nation, a situation that makes the English audience reflect deeply about the same thing. The Brobdingnag King also refuses Gulliver’s gunpowder; as such weapon seems like to invite violence and power abuse. At this part of the novel, readers may perceive that the Brobdingnag people are not super humans, but made of flesh and blood; they are just morally bigger than the reader might be. However, such virtue is not impossible to a regular human to attain, to reach the size of a moral giant/ giant moral. In Part I and II, we can possibly understand the connection between postures and human sizes, as if moral people are huge (Brobdingnagians), and immoral ones are tiny (Lilliputians).

Firstly, in the third part of the book – *A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnag, Glubbudbrib, and Kapan*, Lemuel finds himself on a floating island, named Laputa. According

to Kabak (2015), in this dystopian satire, Swift highlights his skepticism regarding the Enlightenment thinkers through the Laputans, as we can perceive in the following fragment: “It seems, the Minds of these People are so taken up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, or attend to Discourses of other, without being roused by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and Hearing” (SWIFT, 1996, p. 114). This is Swift’s first criticism on science and on English institutions, describing that the Laputans minds and bodies do not work together. In order to Laputans connect mind and body, they have to be stimulated by “flappers”, instruments to call physical attention, as their minds are heavily concerned with thinking. To Gulliver, even though they are good in mathematics and music, their investigation do not produce satisfactory or practical outcome, and goes on stating that

[...] These people are under continual Disquietudes, never enjoying a Minute’s Peace of Mind; and their Disturbances proceed from Causes which very little affect the rest of Mortals. Their Apprehensions arise from Several Changes they dread in the Celestial Bodies. (SWIFT, 1996, p. 118).

Such excerpt shows Swift’s (1996) criticism on the disconnection between science and reality. In order to weave Gulliver a garment, the tailor takes his “altitude by a Quadrant, and then with a Rule and Compasses, described the Dimensions and Out-Lines of my whole Body; [...] and in six Days brought my Cloth very ill made, and quite out of shape” (p. 116) due to a miscalculations. This passion to reason is a mockery made by Swift (1996) to the rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which Locke’s theories on natural religion were popular as well as Descartes’ theories on the use of reason.

When Lemuel leaves Laputa, he goes to Balnibarbi where he is permitted to visit the Grand Academy of Lagado, where he meets different scholars who are trying, for example, to extract the sunlight from cucumbers or to make food out of human excrement.

He had been Eight Years upon a Project for extracting Sun-Beams out of Cucumbers, which were to be put into Vials hermetically sealed, and let out to warm the Air in raw inclement Summers. He told me, he did not doubt in Eight Years or more, that he should be able to supply the Governors Gardens with Sun-shine at a reasonable Rate. (SWIFT, 1996, p. 132).

As it is possible to perceive, the scholars met by Gulliver have their studies based on meticulous calculations and yet in practice they have no use, and this may be taken as a mockery to the eighteenth-century science.

Tired of Lagado and Balnibarbi, Gulliver goes to the island of Glubbdbdrib, a land of magicians who have the power to summon up the dead that usually try to correct the misinformation spread by History over the years. According to Lund (2006), in this episode, “Gulliver draws attention to the size, strength and virtue of the Ancients in contrast to the corruption that has afflicted the Moderns” (LUND, 2006, p. 161). Swift (1996) keeps on introducing more literary heroes and, by meeting them, Lemuel discovers how much the world has declined and how much of what passes for history is actually a group of lies, as the heroes start to correct the modern History.

As every Person called up made exactly the same Appearance he had done in the World, it gave me melancholy Reflections to observe how much the Race of human Kind was degenerate among us, within these Hundred of Years past. How the Pox under all its Consequences and Denominations had altered every Lineament of an *English* Countenance; shortened the Size of Bodies, unbraced the Nerves, relaxed the Sinews and Muscles, introduced a sallow Complexion, and rendered the Flesh loose and *rancid*. (SWIFT, 1996, p. 150).

In the fourth part of the book – *A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms* – Gulliver meets the Houyhnhnms – horses with super rational souls and high moral standards – and compared them with the dirty and depraved Yahoos that are in fact human beings when his hate at the mankind reaches its climax. With regard to the horses, Gulliver points out that “upon the whole, the Behaviour of these Animals was so orderly and rational, so acute and judicious” (SWIFT, 1996, p. 169). During his first meeting with the Houyhnhnms, he states: “while He and I were thus employed, another Horse came up; who applying himself to the first in a very formal Manner, they gently struck each other Right Hoof before, neighing several times by Turns, and varying the Sound, which seemed to be almost articulate (SWIFT, 1996, p. 168). Gulliver moves on saying: “the two Creatures stood silent while I spoke, seeming to listen with great Attention; and when I had ended, they neighed frequently towards each other, as if they were engaged in serious Conversation” (SWIFT, 1996, p. 169).

On the other hand, the very first creatures Gulliver had actually met in this land were the Yahoos. As Lemuel describes, “their Heads and Breasts were covered with a thick Hair, some frizzled and others lank, they had Beards like Goats, and long Ridge of Hair down their Backs, and fore Parts of their Legs and Feet; but the rest of their bodies were bare” (p. 166). So far, Gulliver thought he would not be compared to the Yahoos, as they were so savage and rude, until the day he was confused with one of them. Then,

The Master Horse ordered a Sorrel Nag, one of his Servants, to untie the largest of these Animals, and take him into a Yard. The Beast and I were brought close together; and our Countenances diligently compared, both by Master and Servant, who thereupon repeated several Times de Word Yahoo. My Horror and Astonishment are not to be described, when I observed, in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure; the Face of it indeed was flat and broad, the Nose depressed, the Lips large, and the Mouth wide: But these Differences are common to all savage Nations (SWIFT, 1996, p. 172).

After some experience in the land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver confesses: “all the Knowledge I have of any Value, was acquired by the Lectures I received from my Master, and from hearing the Discourses of him and his Friends; to which I should be prouder to listen than to dictate to the greatest and wisest Assembly in Europe” (SWIFT, 1996, p. 211). Put in a simple way, the Houyhnhnms are animals/ horses, hence, they are not humans. These physical difference parallels the abstract differences, as they are completely rational, innocent, and undepraved. Men, on the other hand, are capable of reasoning, but are also passionate, proud, and depraved.

When he thinks of his family or friends – or the human race in general – he considers them all Yahoos “in Shape and Disposition” (SWIFT, 1996, p. 211), maybe just a bit more civilized and qualified with speech, but without making use of reason. In this perspective, according to Burgess (2008), nothing is more powerful and horrid than Gulliver’s return home when he cannot stand the smell and touch of his wife, as it resembles the Yahoos making him vomit.

I BEGAN last Week to permit my Wife to sit at Dinner with me, at the farthest End of a long Table; and to answer (but with the utmost Brevity) the few Questions I asked her. Yet the Smell of a *Yahoo* continuing very offensive, I always keep my Nose well stopt with Rue, Lavender, or Tobacco-Leaves. And although it be hard for a Man late in Life to remove old Habits; I am not altogether out of Hopes in some Time to suffer a Neighbour *Yahoo* in my Company, without the Apprehension I am yet under of his Teeth or his Claws. (SWIFT, 1996, p. 225).

One of the possible interpretations to this case is that Swift tries to reveal that the more we see of humans, the less we want to be one of them what is also corroborated by the following passages:

I remember when I was in Lilliput, the Complexions of those diminutive People appeared to me the fairest in the World. (SWIFT, 1996, p. 60).

This made me reflect upon the fair Skins of our English Ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own Size, and their Defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass, where we find by Experiment that the smoothest and whited Skins look rough and coarse, an ill coloured. (p. 60).

By the means of that, the magnification of the weakness of England and Lemuel Gulliver make them look pathetic.

By compiling some of Swift's satires, we can understand why it ought to be considered a novel for adults and eager readers instead of a comic fable for children. Even though it may pass unperceived by most of the readers, mainly for those who the culture is based in the English tradition, there are severe criticisms on English values, people and institutions in *Gullivers Travels*. Furthermore, by means of Swift's satires, we can grasp some of the tensions, issues and discussions perpetrated in the 18th-century England.

Final Considerations

Eighteenth-century writing is full of pride in England as the land of liberty, and saw a corresponding growth in national self-confidence accompanying the expansion of the Empire. However, *Gulliver's Travels* that has long been taken as a comic fable for kids offers a bitter criticism of the 18th-century Britain with regard to its politics, religion, morals and science. The major function of the satire is not only to mock constitutions or characters, but to improve their conditions. The function of *Gulliver's Travels* is then to mock Jonathan Swift's period as well as try to improve its conditions in society in that century.

As pointed out in our introduction, it is possible that our historical reality is improved if it is fed with information provided by Art and Literature. In that sense, Pasco (2004) states that the last half of the eighteenth century gives reason to believe that literature is capable of offering a particular useful opening onto the reality of people's lives. Therefore, in the perspective that literature can be read as a historical document, through the satires brought by Jonathan Swift, at least for the more attentive readers, it is possible to perceive some possible features of England in the 18th century.

While some scholars use literary works for an illustration of conclusions about a given period, others turn to them as a source of indication of that reality (KUPSKE; SOUZA, 2015).

In the case of *Gulliver's Travels*, as we have pointed out cultural and social aspects become clear and in a process of on-going perpetuation by Lemuel Gulliver's narratives in the novel. However, while literature in one way or another is going to reflect the *zeitgeist* of its creation, we must not believe that a single work in isolation is capable of providing trustworthy insights into the thoughts, feelings, customs, and details of everyday life of a given period (PASCO, 2004). In the case of *Gulliver's Travels*, the England described is quite coherent to what historians claim it to be. Even though we should not take it as a complete guide to such period and nation, it is definitely a great and satiric introduction.

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